DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 463 124 RC 023 426

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TITLE Using a Web-Based Tutorial To Teach the IEP Process.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Postsecondary Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 2002-03-00
NOTE 8p.; In: No Child Left Behind: The Vital Role of Rural Schools. Annual National Conference Proceedings of the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) (22nd, Reno, Nevada, March 7-9, 2002); see RC 023 405. Supported by Project Learning Links, a PT[cubed] grant awarded to the College of Education, University of Nevada, Reno.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Method (Teaching Technique); Distance Education; Higher Education; *Individualized Education Programs; Material Development; *Programmed Instructional Materials; *Special Education; *Teacher Education; *Web Based Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Nevada; University of Nevada Reno; Web Sites

ABSTRACT

A Web-based tutorial was developed to teach preservice special education teachers about the individualized education program (IEP) process in Nevada and to allow them to practice development of specific IEP components. The Web site has four major sections, which: (1) review the process by which children become eligible for special education; (2) explain each component of the IEP, using Nevada state-adopted forms; (3) present case studies and allow students to practice the formats for writing goals, objectives, and justification statements; and (4) provide additional Web-based resources focused on the IEP. The third section--"Practice"--is the most complex and contains exercises to help students write and evaluate the narrative parts of the IEP; case studies that lead students through the decision-making process and include links to professional opinions on each aspect of the case; and additional case studies to be used for student evaluation. The tutorial was used for the first time during the fall 2001 semester, freeing class time to cover other subjects. Students accessed the Web site an average of 16 times during the semester; four students who were asked to resubmit their IEPs were among those who used the tutorial the least. Evaluations of the tutorial by 19 students indicated that they used the tutorial an average 4.2 hours and found it valuable, with the practice section being most highly rated. (SV)

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USING A WEB-BASED TUTORIAL TO TEACH THE IEP PROCESS

Learning to teach is an evolutionary process that takes time to unfold. Add to that the complexity of learning the laws and regulations for special education, and you have an ambitious task indeed. I currently teach a course within the special education sequence in our teacher education program in which students learn the basics of both case management/service coordination and the fundamentals of teaching elementary-aged children who have mild to moderate disabilities. While students will go on to take additional courses that will refine and reinforce these areas, I need to build a good foundation for their future learning.

For several semesters I had been dissatisfied with how the course progressed. If I spent ample time reviewing policies, forms, and the format for developing the IEP, I did not have enough time to discuss how to make relevant instructional decisions about students. If I hurried through policies and IEP development, students were at a loss in terms of the format and vocabulary needed to complete assignments that called for them to write goals, objectives, and placement justifications. I reviewed published texts and CD format materials that described IEP development for possible use in my course. While these provided excellent information, they did not meet two of my specific goals for the course: (1) familiarity with the Nevada state-adopted IEP form that is used in all districts, and (2) the importance of tying IEP goals and objectives to Nevada curriculum standards.

During the summer of 2001, I decided to develop a web site through which students could learn about the IEP process and practice the development of specific components of the IEP. The web site that resulted, ***The IEP Tutorial: How to Write Effective Individualized Educational Programs for Students with Disabilities***, has gone a long way in addressing the needs of my students and my goals for the course. This paper will describe the development and format of the tutorial and present preliminary results about the effectiveness of the tutorial during its first semester of use.

Development of the Tutorial

During my initial thinking about the site, I listed the information and skills I wanted the students to learn, based on many of the activities I had done during class sessions. These included the following:

- Review the process by which children are made eligible for special education, from initial concern through placement
- Explain of each part of the IEP, using the Nevada state-adopted forms
- Learn the formats for writing goals, objectives, and justification statements
- Critiquing and fine-tune goals and objectives that are not well written
- Develop IEPs for children described in case studies

I found it helpful to sketch the site as a hierarchy of boxes and connecting lines in order to think through the relationship of the sections and the number and types of pages that would be needed. While this sketch aided me in the initial stages of development, I found the entire process was much more complex than my initial imaginings.

I used Adobe GoLive 5.0 (Adobe Systems, 2000) to develop the site because of its capabilities for total site management and up-dating. I learned the system as I went and experienced many false starts and mistakes. I attempted to structure the activities on the web site in an interactive fashion, similar to many of the in-class exercises I had developed for my course—but seldom had time to fully use. As a result, the site has four major sections:

1. **Qualifying for Special Education** – This section explains the process by which students qualify for special education. It includes sections on the referral for evaluation, the procedures for identification, and how special education services are determined. This explanation puts the IEP in the larger context of how special education services begin for a student.

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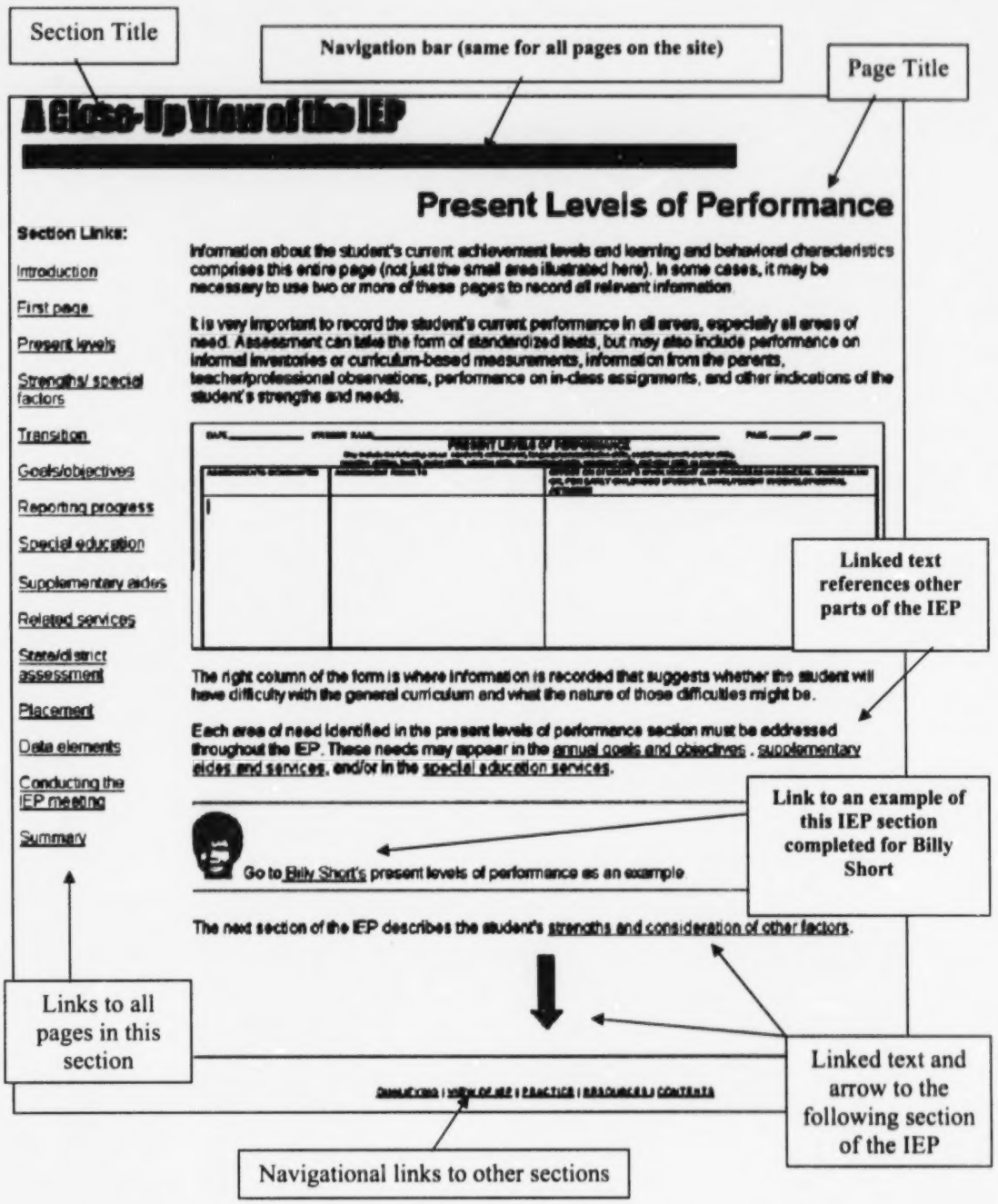
2. **A close-Up View of the IEP** – In this section, each part of the IEP form used in the state of Nevada is examined. The various components of the IEP are shown and explained. For some sections, an example is provided for a fictitious student named Billy Short.
3. **Practice: Cases and Examples** – The decision-making process that goes into the development of the IEP is explored in this section of the tutorial. First, formats for writing specific components of the IEP are introduced and practiced. Then ways to think about selecting goals, objectives, and placements for specific students are discussed. Finally, three cases of students are presented with incomplete IEP forms. These cases are part of the course requirements for CI 410/610 Special Education Curriculum: General Methods.
4. **Additional Resources** – Web-based resources that focus on the IEP and other federal and state procedures are complied in this section.

Each of these sections, plus the table of contents, can be reached via the navigation bar at the top and smaller links at the bottom of every page on the site. Navigation links for content within each section are found in a column at the left of each page. Text links are also used to take users to various sections for reference or review.

To illustrate, a page from the section, A Close-Up View of the IEP, is reproduced on the next page (the actual web site is in color). This page shows and explains the section of Nevada's IEP form that contains a student's present levels of performance. The various links and navigational aids are labeled. The page also contains a link to an example of present levels of performance statements completed for an elementary-aged student, Billy Short.


Section Title
Navigation bar (same for all pages on the site)
Page Title
A Close-Up View of the IEP
Present Levels of Performance
Section Links:
Introduction
First page
Present levels
Strengths/ special factors
Transition
Goals/objectives
Reporting progress
Special education
Supplementary aides
Related services
State/district assessment
Placement
Data elements
Conducting the IEP meeting
Summary
Information about the student's current achievement levels and learning and behavioral characteristics comprises this entire page (not just the small area illustrated here). In some cases, it may be necessary to use two or more of these pages to record all relevant information.
It is very important to record the student's current performance in all areas, especially all areas of need. Assessment can take the form of standardized tests, but may also include performance on informal inventories or curriculum-based measurements, information from the parents, teacher/professional observations, performance on in-class assignments, and other indications of the student's strengths and needs.
Linked text references other parts of the IEP
The right column of the form is where information is recorded that suggests whether the student will have difficulty with the general curriculum and what the nature of those difficulties might be.
Each area of need identified in the present levels of performance section must be addressed throughout the IEP. These needs may appear in the annual goals and objectives , supplementary aides and services, and/or in the special education services.
Link to an example of this IEP section completed for Billy Short
Go to Billy Short's present levels of performance as an example
The next section of the IEP describes the student's strengths and consideration of other factors.
Links to all pages in this section
Linked text and arrow to the following section of the IEP
Navigational links to other sections

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The most complex section of the tutorial is entitled **Practice: Cases and Examples**. This section is divided into three major components:

Learning the Format – This section of the tutorial contains five exercises. As the title implies, each of the exercises helps students learn how to write and evaluate the narrative parts of the IEP. The following is a brief explanation of each of the five links and the exercises included:

- Annual Goals - Presents the format and considerations for writing goal statements for an IEP and tying them to Nevada's general curriculum standards.
- Short-term Objectives/Benchmarks - Illustrates how to break annual goals into short-term objectives or benchmarks to demonstrate students progress
- Criteria for Effective Goals and Objectives - Presents criteria for looking at goals and objectives to determine if they reflect preferred practices in special education.
- Fine Tuning - Gives examples of IEP objectives and asks the user to critique them. The students re-write the goals and objectives, then see how another professional might write them
- Justification Statements - Presents format and considerations for writing the placement justification statements in the IEP.

Practice Decision Making – This section of the tutorial uses three brief case studies to introduce students to the decision-making process for determining annual goals, short-term objectives or benchmarks, special education services, and supplementary aides and services for children who have disabilities. In each of the cases, students are given a list of the child's present levels of performance and must determine the areas of need for that child. The students consult the Nevada Curriculum Standards to determine an appropriate goal for one area of need. They use a worksheet to write the annual goal, and then break it into short-term objectives. After designing the goal and objectives, they determine the nature of special education services, supplementary aids and services, and related services. They end the exercise by determining placement and writing a justification statement. Through links, they are able to compare their responses with those of another professional at any step of the process.

It is recommended that students go through the three cases from beginning to the end to see how the decisions throughout the IEP must relate to each other. The cases progress from less to more complex, although they reflect typical needs of children with mild to moderate disabilities.

- Diane Gordon - Diane is a sixth grade student who has learning disabilities in reading comprehension and in math. Diane has no social or behavioral difficulties, and she gets along well with her peers and teachers.
- Sam Philips -Sam is a second grade student with specific learning disabilities in reading and spelling, as well a medical diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Sam has difficulties staying on task, maintaining attention, and impulsive behaviors.
- Albert Culver - Al is a fifth grade student who has mild mental retardation, with a medical diagnosis of Down syndrome. Al receives the related services of the Speech/Language Pathologist (SLP), Occupational Therapist (OT), Adapted Physical Education (APE), as well as the special education teacher. A paraprofessional works with Al in the general classroom. Although Al has some difficulty with age-appropriate social interactions, he has many friends in the 5th grade and no significant behavioral difficulties.

Assigned Cases – This component also present three case studies of children with mild to moderate disabilities. The students are given more detailed background information and the children's present levels of performance. For one case, the students are assigned to groups of about four and most complete an IEP in a collaborative process during a class session. This group process more closely simulates how IEPs are conducted in schools. Students are always surprised how long it takes for them to complete this assignment. The other two cases are used individually by the students to develop an IEP to submit for grading. They may choose whichever child they prefer. The IEP must be completed to a standard of beginning mastery. Students may be asked to re-submit the IEP or return to the tutorial for review, then try again with the other case provided.

Effectiveness of the Tutorial: Preliminary Results

At this point, judgment of the effectiveness of the tutorial is based on limited information. It was used for the first time in the fall semester of 2001 by a class of 24 students (CI 410 Special Education Curriculum: General Methods). The tutorial was delivered as a link from the class site on WebCT. Three sources of information about the effectiveness of the tutorial are available: (1) my subjective assessment of how the use of the tutorial affected the way the course was delivered, as well as the quality of the IEP assignments turned in by the students, (2) tracking data from WebCT indicating how frequently students accessed the class site, and (3) a questionnaire, completed anonymously by students at the end of the course, asking them to assess the effectiveness of the tutorial. Each source of information is discussed below.

In a typical semester prior to the development of the tutorial, I spent approximately five weeks discussing the IEP and other aspects of service coordination, law, and special education procedures. During the semester in which the tutorial was used, I reduced this to two weeks plus one week for the in-class IEP completed in collaborative groups. This allowed more time in the semester to discuss instructional methods and how to make instructional decisions about teaching students with mild to moderate disabilities.

I noticed some interesting trends related to the quality of the IEP assignments submitted for grading. More students received full credit on the assignments than in past semesters, and I feel that most students more thoroughly and accurately completed all parts of the IEP. Four students were asked to re-submit their IEPs. This is approximately the same percentage as in past semesters. The difference is that I was able to direct students to parts of the tutorial that might be most helpful for successful completion of the assignment (whether or not they chose to use the tutorial is another matter and is discussed below).

After the semester was over, I found the student tracking function built into WebCT. This recorded the total number of times each student accessed the site. It is important to note that there were some readings and other course information posted through WebCT, so not all of the times recorded reflected student use of the tutorial. Also, the data do not reflect how long the site was used each time a student accessed it. In addition to the number of times students accessed the site, WebCT indicated the date that each student first used the site. Interestingly, three of the four students who had to re-submit their IEPs were among the students who used the site the least (0-4 times). None of the four students accessed the site for the first time until after they were asked to re-submit the assignment (if they accessed it at all). The mean for the number of times the students in the class accessed the WebCT site was 16.3, with the median being 13 times. Students ranged from not accessing the site at all (three students) to a student who accessed it 65 times.

At the end of the semester, students were asked to evaluate the IEP tutorial. Their responses were anonymous and the questionnaires were sealed until after grades were posted. Nineteen of the 24 students completed the evaluation (79%). Students were asked to determine which part(s) of the tutorial they used and how useful they found each to be. They used a 5-point scale with 5 being "highly useful" to 1 being "not useful." The results of this evaluation are presented in the table below.

	Qualifying for Special Education	A Close-Up View of the IEP	Practice: Cases and Examples	Additional Resources	Did not use the tutorial
Number of students who evaluated this section	14	16	14	7	3
Mean evaluation	4.64	4.94	5.0	4.14	--

In addition, students were asked to evaluate the activities in the section "Practice: Cases and Examples" and to estimate the total amount of time they spent using the tutorial. Room was given on the form for them to write comments and suggestions for improvement of the tutorial. The students' evaluations of the various parts of "Practice: Cases and Examples" are presented below.

	Writing Goals	Writing Objectives	Criteria	Fine-Tuning	Placement Justific.	Case Studies
Number of students who evaluated activities	14	14	12	11	12	14
Mean evaluation	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0

Students reported that they spent from 0 to 15 hours with the tutorial, with the mean being 4.2 hours and the median being 3.5 hours. Seven students wrote comments. All contained positive remarks. Three examples of student comments follow:

I would never have been able to write my IEP for this class if it were not for the IEP tutorial!! It was a lifesaver! I hope it will be offered for teachers in the near future. YOU DID AN EXCELLENT JOB!!

It was wonderful. What a great idea. I hope it goes big. I would buy it!!!

This tutorial helped me practice and fine tune my objectives and goals. I love it; it was a very useful tool.

It is important to note that all the evaluation information presented here is very tentative and based on the experience of one semester. Overall, the students who used the tutorial seemed to value it and feel that it was helpful for the course. Indications are that the tutorial has potential to support the knowledge and skills of preservice teachers in the area of developing IEPs.

Future directions for development of the IEP tutorial could be to add information in related areas such as assessment, transition, behavior intervention plans, and students with more significant disabilities. These components could be used in other courses in the special education sequence. This could enable students tie new information to past learning, as well as get an overall picture of how the IEP process supports all aspects of the education of students with disabilities.

Persons interested in viewing the **IEP Tutorial** will find it at http://online.unr.edu/classes/ci410
Since the site is under development, it is requested that others do not use the site without permission of the developer. Comments about the site and suggestions for improvement would be appreciated, and may be directed via email to cheney@unr.edu

Reference

Adobe GoLive 5.0 [Computer software]. (2000). San Jose, CA: Adobe Systems Inc.

This tutorial was produced with support from Project Learning Links, a PT^3 grant awarded to the College of Education of the University of Nevada, Reno, by the Office of Postsecondary Education of the U.S. Department of Education.

Thanks go to Dr. Diann Laing, Instructional Designer at the University of Nevada, Reno. Without her generous amounts of freely given time, instruction and encouragement, this tutorial would not have been developed.

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